

NEW BEGINNINGS/RENEWED COMMITMENTS

Caribbean Nazarene College

Commencement 2010

Ephesians 4:30-5:2

Philippians 2:5-8

II Peter 1:5-9

I remember my final chapel service at Mount Vernon Nazarene University prior to my retirement as the school president. I stated that some things would definitely change for Anne and me; and most definitely, some things would not change. It is in this spirit and frame of reference that I speak to the Caribbean Nazarene College class of 2010. It seems altogether appropriate to pause at this vantage point and reflect back on an important chapter in your lives that is coming to a close. Then, to anticipate with you what is possible in the chapters to come, and to identify some things that will not change.

A colleague said to me recently, "Life is too short not to live together kindly, compassionately, and forgivingly." I was immediately reminded of Ephesians 4:32 (NIV); *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*

As I reflected on the scriptural passage and the words of my friend, I said to myself, "I don't want to live my life as a 'bitter' man...and I don't want my students, colleagues, and friends to live their lives with 'bitterness, rage, and anger...slander...and malice.'" (Ephesians 4:31). And, I say that to you.

My challenge to each member of the CNC class of 2010 as you exit from this campus: Make it your prayer, intention, commitment—your resolve—to be known as a kind, compassionate, and forgiving person. Life is too short to live otherwise. New beginnings for you may **include** some old, tried and true principles of living and leading with the mind of Christ. Some things will not change for you, even with your new beginnings!

I invite you to reaffirm three passionate convictions that I believe will strengthen you and me on our journey toward this Christlike way of living kindly, compassionately, and forgivingly. They are deceptively simple. These steps are:

#1 Speak carefully.

#2 Care deeply.

#3 Forgive quickly.

Let me explain!

Step #1: Speak Carefully (Ephesians 4:29)

Our words to others can bless or burn. The words we speak, in New Testament perspective, are to communicate grace to those who hear.

The reality is that we live in an unkind, uncompassionate, and unforgiving world. Increasingly in the workplace, and sometimes in the home, we experience abuse, slander, and misunderstanding as the norms, rather than the exception.

And the differences we experience because of our background, temperament, social status, or religious faith, often divide us rather than provide a bridge for greater understanding and perspective.

It even happens on a Christian college campus. In these real-life encounters, our conversation should express a sacramental quality.

For Paul, our words should communicate grace. They should... Focus on others in conversation, not self; focus on encouragement, not discouragement; focus on building up, not tearing down; focus on supporting, not undermining; focus on healing, not hurting; focus on caring, not indifference.

Dialogue, for Paul, was sacramental in nature. Through our words, God's very grace should flow. Jesus said, *"For whatever is in your heart determines what you say"* (Matthew 12:34b, NLT).

Words we use can bless others or "burn" others (and we are so careless at times with our words). Words that bless come from attitudes of the heart, not techniques of the head. The attitudes of our hearts should be: I love you; I care for you; I need you; I respect you; I serve you.

These attitudes, when reflected to others will make a difference in their lives. People are so used to words that tear down, discourage, undermine, hurt, and focus only on one's self.

For these reasons, words that minister grace – words that become channels of God's grace - will have a powerful impact and make a difference.

Step #1: Speak carefully. Our words to others can bless or burn.

Step #2: Care Deeply.

Our care for others can be intimate or distant. But what do we mean by "care?"

The word “care” finds its root in the Celtic term “kara,” which means lament. The basic meaning of care is “to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with.”

I am struck by the background of the word “care” because we tend to look at caring of the strong toward the weak, of the powerful toward the powerless, of the “haves” toward the “have-nots.” I am coming to understand that biblical compassion is not a skill which we acquire. Rather, it is a quality of the human heart which must be revealed.

The late Henri Nouwen often stated that you cannot get a Ph.D. in caring. Nouwen helped me to realize that when we see the other person and discover in that person gentleness, tenderness, and other beautiful gifts which he or she is not able to see, then our compassionate heart is revealed!

What a profound thought! Our compassionate heart is revealed as we enable others to see what they have not, nor cannot, see in themselves!

To be compassionate is not, first of all, something we do for others, but rather it is discovering with others their divinely given resources and inner qualities. It is a way of being present with others and standing with them in their times of need.

I’m slowly coming to see that God wants us to be with others...not to prove that we are valuable to them.

When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who is silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion. Or, the person who stays with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing, and not doing—that is the friend who cares.

“Caring deeply” in these moments demands that... We listen intently. We speak directly and caringly. We ask questions for the other person’s sake and not for our own.

We are truly present, even in the quietness. And we pray honestly, openly, and confidently!

Nouwen introduced me to the phenomenal concept of voluntary displacement in his book, *Compassion*, and in other books and numerous articles on the subject. Voluntary displacement means that for the sake of others, we willingly go to places we had rather not go. We move out of our comfort zones voluntarily and “displace” ourselves outside the familiar to us.

Why? A need exists; A response from within is required. An inward call from God is felt. We go, because of who we are.

Voluntary displacement can take us... to the inner city, or around the world. This calling can be for a brief time, or for a lifetime.

Again, I am coming to see that God wants us to be with others...not to prove that we are valuable to them.

Step #2: Care deeply. Our care for others can be intimate or distant.

Step #3: Forgive Quickly.

Our forgiveness of others can be immediate or delayed.

The words of Jesus on the cross regarding forgiveness are profound. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

His words did not change the situation. His words did not change the people involved. His words did not reduce the pain He felt. His words did not change things externally. His words of forgiveness, on the cross, changed everything internally.

He was not going to let what others said and did to him create within himself bitterness, resentment, and anger within Him. He was not going to permit what others said and did to him to create a break in the relationship with God the Father. It simply was not worth it! He was not going to give others that much control over His life.

It was as if He was saying, "Do what you have to do, say what you have to say, but I will not permit these words and deeds done to me and said against me to create a break in the relationship with the Father. It's just not worth it!"

The issue is not so much the response from **others** to our efforts to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving. Our efforts may not always be received in the spirit they were given. But withholding forgiveness permits Satan to gain a foothold in our lives.

Bitterness develops. Anger increases. Resentment manifests itself. And, Satan laughs.

Our calling is to be Christlike even in the uncomfortable situations in which we sometimes find ourselves. God will provide blessing and joy within us, regardless of the apparent rejection sometimes from the other persons involved.

As believers, we forgive, not to change people, but because God in Christ forgave us. And we were so undeserving.

Sometimes we have been hurt so deeply that we can't reach out with integrity, in forgiveness to others. Remember the words of Jesus "Father, forgive them..." were words of a prayer! And Paul reminds us that God's grace is sufficient for us, and His power is made perfect in our weakness.

I remember receiving an email from a person who left our campus a few months earlier. From this person's perspective, things were done and not done that continued to bother the individual. Accusations were made.

I hurt for the individual, for the College, and personally. After several days, I responded, not trying to answer each point made. Instead, I asked for forgiveness. Obviously, the school, collectively and individually, had not been for the individual what the person needed from us. I had a choice. I could “brew” over the stinging email, or genuinely seek forgiveness, asking God and the person to teach me through this situation.

Let me summarize these three passionate convictions that I believe will strengthen you and me on our journey toward this Christlike way of living kindly, compassionately, and forgivingly.

Jesus spoke words of grace to others. Therefore, we are to speak carefully. Jesus humbled Himself and did for us on the cross what we could not do for ourselves. Therefore, we also are to care deeply. Jesus forgave us while we yet sinners. Therefore, we are to forgive quickly.

I say to you again: “Life is too short not to live together kindly, compassionately, and forgivingly.” As we speak carefully, care deeply, and forgive immediately, Peter reminds us, our Christian life will be effective and productive (2 Peter 1:5-7).

Before you leave campus this weekend, if you feel resentment, bitterness, or anger towards a student, a faculty or staff member, an administrator, a family member who may be here to celebrate with you, or if you know a person on campus who is hurting and grieving intensely, locate the person.

Ask God to strengthen you. Talk to the individual. Remember our words can be vehicles of grace! Ask him or her for forgiveness for your wrong spirit or express to the person deep care and genuine compassion. Listen to the other person. Pray together, if possible, before you separate.

This kind of Christlike living will make a difference—tonight and throughout your life—

in the home,
in the community,
in the workplace,
in the lives of others, and within yourselves.

Remember, “Life is too short not to live together kindly, compassionately, and forgivingly.”

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